

# ETIENNE GROS

Interviewed by [Kyle Johnson](#)

Portrait by [CanelleK](#)



Born in Saint-Dié des Vosges, France in 1962, he is a graduate of the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris and, of course, an admirable artist who delves into his work with a keen empathy for the female form. Often mixing the abstract with the figurative, his work forges an inspiring story of an artist who's mastery for methods, mixed with an enthusiastic curiosity for new media, gives rise to an impassioned mode of expression strictly his own.

*"Sculpture is the art of the intelligence" -Pablo Picasso*

# "I use the body as a subject capable of conveying an emotion"

**You've said, "The body is for me an obsessive theme." Why are you so obsessed with the human body? Where does that obsession come from?**

I said that because it is an observation since I have always painted, I draw or I make sculptures representing the body or parts of the body. But what has changed or evolved is that I am looking for beauty and I use the theme of the human body for that. It's a pretext. I use the body as a subject capable of conveying an emotion.

**When naming your creations, why do you tend to avoid "titles too faithful or too descriptive?"**

Before giving a title to a painting I let it rest in my studio for several days, sometimes several weeks. This time lapse allows me to observe it and, only when I know that I will not retouch it any more, I can sign and name it. The painting speaks for itself and I prefer to give it a more subjective title of what it evokes or simply because a colour, graphics or a detail reference. This will be an abstract reference such as "White Point, Yellow Right, Back Line, Approach... etc."

**In 2006, what were your thoughts on being awarded the Grand Prix Azart at the Mac Art Fair in Paris?**

I had the pleasure to be selected at this event in which I decided to present on my space few tables but large formats. I did not expect this award and it is always nice to receive the recognition of a jury as well as that of the public.

**While studying at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris you worked under Ferit Iscan, Olivier Debré and Vladimir Veličković. Describe this experience and illustrate how these masters influenced your artistic style.**

It was always wonderful participating with them and I had great experiences, I would not say that they influenced my artistic style because I was always looking for a purely personal approach but their advice helped me indirectly to develop my own Artistic language.

I greatly appreciated the courses of anatomy and living model, as well as visits to great museums like the Louvre, in which I admired and drew the paintings and sculptures of the great masters who represented the human figure in all their power and beauty, like the slaves of Michelangelo, the pictures of Titian, Gericault, David, and Ingres.

**From where do you derive your artistic tastes and influences for your projects? What was your inspiration for the Les Mousse sculptures?**

In my series of sculptures in foam, there is an aesthetic aspect that reminds one of the vestiges of the Greek and Roman sculptures, an idea of uni-

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versality. It is this confrontation that interests me between marbles, stable matter, and foams which are rather unstable and perishable therefore more alive and closer to our human entity.

**In your work, you often seem to mix the abstract and the figurative. Describe your personal style and what it says about you.**

At first my blank canvas is on the floor, then I apply my colours without worrying about the final result. I create an abstract disorder, rich in colour and matter that will be the basis of my picture. I then put it on the wall and I observe it for a long time and suddenly comes out a precise image, then I begin to sketch lines and to sculpt shapes in this abstract matter. I put my order in my disorder. My painting is in this fragile limit between the abstract and the figurative. It often happens that people who discover my work do not immediately perceive the body parts I paint. And I like it a lot!

**Out of all of the artistic processes and/or mediums that you have used, what is your favourite? Why?**

I am a painter first at all, and my favourite medium has always been painting.

However, I'm a grown-up child and I still need to explore other mediums.

If I'm at sea, I will sculpt sirens of sand, detecting in the pebbles the shape that I will make appear with few strokes.

At the river, I would practice the land-art by drawing with water figures on white stones that will evaporate. Nature and its elements inspire me ...

I have started my work on "smokes" by playing in my studio with the carbon deposit of a candle

and then I improved this technique with oil lamps. I used different sizes of lamp's wicks to vary the intensity of the carbon deposit and thus control the result, as a painter does with a brush. My foam sculptures started the day I started playing with a piece of mattress. So I began by kneading this foam with my hands, then by slightly stretching this material, creases appeared, and I found that I could give it the shape of a body or part of a body following my imagination.

But what seems most surprising to me is the rendering and the similarity of this sculpture in foam with our own flesh: colour, soft and malleable texture, and all these small holes that made me immediately thought of the pores of the skin. But when I let go off my fingers the moss turned to its original form. It was then that I thought of a skeleton of wire to maintain this flesh. In addition, foam is a ubiquitous material nowadays. We are born, we sleep, we make love and we die on this material...

**For each of the following experiences, describe how they have shaped your creative process:**

- 1.) Being born in Saint-Dié in 1962
- 2.) Graduating from École des Beaux-Arts in 1986
- 3.) Working and living in/around Paris
- 4.) Acquiring your own studio in Ile de France

I come from a large family of 10 brothers and sisters at the foot of the Vosges Mountains, and since an early age, each one of us took part in the household tasks, which gave us a sense of work and discipline. Moreover, my mother had the obsession to develop in each one of us a sense of curiosity and access to culture. There were a lot of books and LP disks at home, I remem-





ber Wednesday afternoons when there was no school, we participated in a program on the national radio France Musique called "Les enfants et la musique" where it was necessary to make a drawing inspired by a music score or a symphony of a relevant classic musician whose identity was not revealed. Listen, imagine and draw! Then the drawing was sent to the radio station and the following week the speaker announced in his soft voice the names of the winners. It was a joy to hear sometimes this name on the radio and after a year I even received the first prize over the whole year and I got my first radio as a gift. At the same time, I have always continued to drawing, bricolage and gardening, as I have always loved contact with nature.

During the high school years, I went to school of drawing evening classes and my only objective was to return to an art school after my graduation.

Then when I arrived in Paris and I was accepted into the school of fine arts, my life changed. I was in wonderment with a bulimic desire to discover all the marvels and museums of this city. I read, I visited all the art galleries; I nourished my curiosity in all art fields. I attended all the classes that the school offered me; I always drew and painted in search of a personal expression. In 1986 I graduated but living on art was complicated. I quickly gave up of presenting my work to the art galleries, where the always polite comments were the same:

"It's very good, continue, you're still young, come back in a few years." That depressed me! So I decided to present my work in art fairs that is how art galleries started to uphold my work.

**"I continue on the human figure theme, but I realize that my painting is more sculptural"**

During all these years I first worked on a wall of my apartment, then in a larger collective studio, to finally have my own studio.

**When you're not crea-**

**ting, what do you enjoy doing?**  
I take deep breaths; it can be contemplative breaths, artistic breaths, breaths of travel, human breaths...

**What are you currently working on and what can we expect to see from you in the future?**

I continue on the human figure theme, but I realize that my painting is more sculptural; the material is akin to stone with always this carnal side at the same time. The body appears more in 3D volume as if it wanted to leave the canvas. I cannot know how my work will be in the future; I go ahead every day with the surprises of the moment.

**What was the most unpleasant reaction you had something you thought was going to be exciting?**

These are not really unpleasant but rather amazing reactions. About three years ago a collector had ordered me a painting and he did not seem satisfied with the result because he wanted a man's back and saw a woman's back. The picture was sent to his home. Together with the gallery owner we called him to try to understand, it took us 1 hour to find an explanation. He had simply hung the painting upside down on his wall and we understood it in relation to the positioning of the colours. These confusions interest me a lot and I love when my paintings play with it.